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Field Study of Negro Conditions

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Branson

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*January 9/10/11*

# HOME MISSIONS COUNCIL

Tenth Annual Meeting

New York  
January 9, 10 and 11, 1917

With Appendix containing record of  
years 1908 to 1911, inclusive

*N.Y.*



the policy of establishing pastors in the country in those few fields which in any given year are ready for a pastor. We recommend that the salary of these men, to be paid in part by the Boards of Missions, shall be such as the community may be able in time itself to pay, except in poverty stricken or retarded regions.

2. We recommend that Boards of Church Erection concern themselves definitely with providing manses and parsonages for pastors who shall live in the country and that this policy be coordinated with the policy of the Boards of Missions in the establishment of country pastorates.

3. We recommend that the work of these country pastors be promoted by a union of national and local initiative. The local conference or association, classis or presbytery should commit its powers of supervision to the national Board, in order that the whole denomination may be united in promoting the selected churches in the country which in any given year should be set forward and established as pastorates and parishes. The fields thus selected should be visited by the national Secretary with sufficient frequency. Men of high character should be found for these fields and everything done to secure an established pastorate.

4. We recommend that these country pastorates be for not less than five years and that the church be encouraged to keep a pastor for at least ten years in the country. This is for the purpose of promoting definite work and work that will have a future.

5. The Committee on Rural Fields is instructed for the coming year to correspond with colleges and schools in various parts of the country with a view to an increased provision for graduate education and short course education for country pastors.

6. We recommend that Mr. Paul L. Vogt be added to the Rural Fields Committee, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Rev. Ward Platt, D. D.

7. We recommend for the coming year that the appropriation of not more than \$500. to the Rural Fields Committee be continued.

### *FIELD STUDY OF NEGRO CONDITIONS*

Pending the consideration of the report, a paper by Professor E. C. Branson of the University of North Carolina, regarding a field study of negro conditions in Orange County, North Carolina, was read by Mr. H. N. Morse as follows:

This study of Negro Churches and Sunday Schools in Orange County, North Carolina, was made by Rev. Walter Patten, who since 1914 has been pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, at Chapel Hill, the seat of the University of North Carolina. During his pastorate here he has been pursuing courses in philosophy, economics, and rural economics and sociology offered by the University, and in June, 1916, won his Master's degree.

The field study assigned him in his rural sociology course was the Negro Churches and Sunday Schools of Orange County: (1) because our University courses in Country-Life Conditions and Problems are always based on direct field studies, (2) because church and Sunday school problems were personally appealing to him as a minister, (3) because he is a member of the Sunday School Board of his Conference, and a capital student of Sunday school problems in general, (4) because the Negro Sunday School in the South is, as he says, a mired wheel, (5) because in Orange the Negroes are thinly scattered among a larger white population and thus present one of the two distinct race problems of the South, and (6) because we hoped to stir the spiritual conscience of North Carolina in behalf of a backward race that sits in darkness and in the shadow of death—our brothers in black among whom we live and move and have our being daily.

These field studies are based upon the questionnaire prepared by the North Carolina Club at the University in co-operation with the Office of Markets and Rural Organization of the Federal Department of Agriculture, and used by club members in a similar study of the White Churches and Sunday Schools of the County in 1915-16.

During the year devoted by Mr. Patten to his particular field study, he visited and photographed the Negro Church buildings of the county. He got into communication with the ministers serving the 27 Negro Churches of Orange; with the Sunday school superintendents, teachers, church officers, and leaders. He spent many hours in conference with the Negroes in their churches, schools, and homes. His field experiences establish certain facts and lead into various conclusions. Among many, these:

1. The astonishing gains made by the Negroes of the county in conquering the conditions of material well-being, as property owners and tax payers. Nearly nine-tenths of the Negro dwellings of the county are occupied by owners, and in general their homes are well furnished, neat and clean within—less so without. Their homes are being screened against flies and mosquitoes, while back-yards and outhouses are beginning to challenge attention in a hopeful way. In these particulars, the town Negroes make a better showing than the country Negroes.

2. The direct result of such economic conditions is directly reflected by the small amount of petty offenses against law and order, and by the even smaller ratio of felonies committed by Negroes in Orange. In 165 years only one rape has been committed by a Negro of the county and only four Negroes have ever been hanged in Orange. Pilfering is certainly at a minimum among the Negroes of the county, while forgeries and similar attacks upon property are unknown. On the whole, they are a law-abiding, self-respecting element of population; industrious, self-sustaining, reliable, polite, and accommodating in rare measure. Chronic indigence is almost unknown among them.

The level of race pride in general is so high among the Negroes of Orange that a sturdy exercise of public opinion under the leadership of our Negro preachers would quickly put an end to the one offense that is most common among Negroes, and that most of all brings the good name of Negro citizenship into disrepute in the county. I speak of the illegal peddling of liquors. The blind tigers and boot-leggers are commonly Negroes, and just as commonly they are the

convenient tools of white people, who tempt them with bewildering rewards and desert them when the law lays a heavy hand on them. Here is a social problem that should appeal to our Negro preachers who are eminently effective in raising the standards of race pride. As usual the law of public opinion among both races is the matter of critical importance.

3. The Negro preachers are preferred leaders—not in religious concerns solely, but in the whole round of Negro activities and interests in every community. Their churches are social as well as religious centers. In the county-wide campaign in 1915 for better sanitary conditions, we found that the best approach—indeed the only approach—to the Negroes was through their preachers and churches. Lantern slides and lectures exhibiting the menace of unsanitary privies seemed to many people out of place in the white churches, but without exception public health seemed to the Negroes to be a perfectly proper church concern.

The Negro preacher is usually an adviser in the details of property transfers, and a leader in all efforts for better school conditions. Commonly he is custodian of society and lodge collections as well as church funds. He is more than apt to be a property owner and man of common affairs; to live among his people and to lead them in the matters of ordinary daily life. Only three of our white preachers live among their country parishioners, but nine of the country Negro preachers are settled down among their people as shepherds of their flocks, and all of them own their homes and farms. Only one of the resident white country preachers is a householder.

4. Our Negro preachers like the race they serve have ceased to be concerned about politics—so, almost without exception. For many years after the War the organizing, constructive genius of the race was absorbed by the concerns of civic freedom and party politics, and Negro preachers, whatever else they might be, were political leaders.

It is so no longer. Our Orange county Negroes are busy with the details of daily toil, with bread-winning industries that show remarkable variety, with the acquisition of

homes and farms, household goods, domestic animals, farm tools and equipments, better schools, and larger bank accounts. In dumb, blind fashion, they realize at last that home and farm ownership means economic freedom, and that without economic freedom, civic democracy is but a name full of sound and fury signifying nothing. At all events our Negroes have a larger faith in bank books than in spelling books and ballot boxes. They are beginning at the beginning of all real racial development. The final end may be far ahead, but with a start of this sort the movement forward and upward is informed with the conquering forces of imperious necessity. Civilizing a landless, homeless people is a futile endeavor everywhere and always.

5. Societies in Negro country church communities in Orange are rare, and even in our small towns they are few when compared with the various and numerous organizations of all sorts in City Negro Churches. The societies we find in the Negro churches in Hillsboro, Chapel Hill, and Carrboro are mainly church aid societies of one sort or another, charged with mission collections, care of church buildings or parsonages and so forth. The social organizations are very few, because the congregations are mainly rural, and even the village churches exist under rural conditions. Sick Benefit Societies, Burial Benefit Orders, fraternal lodges and the like are fewer than a half-dozen among the Negroes of the whole county.

6. The place of the Church in the Negro's consciousness is large. Under fervent and fervid leadership he is deeply impressed with the importance of church membership. He does not question its being the doorway to Heaven; without it he feels that he is on the broad highway to Hell. And here is one of the reasons why Negro congregations support their churches with a generosity that is amazing. For instance, the salary of Negro preachers in Orange in 1914 averaged \$2.05 per church member. The salaries received by the white preachers of the county represented exactly the same average per member. The per capita burden borne for buildings and expenses was 88 cents by the Negroes against \$1.04 by the whites. Where the Negroes lagged was in the support of missions, their per capita contribution being 13

cents against 91 cents for the whites. All told, the burden laid by religion on church members in the county in 1914 was \$3.04 per Negro church member and \$4.00 for the whites. The meagre wealth of the Negro considered, we may well say that the figures are amazing.

Another reason for the generous church contribution of the Negroes lies in their manner of taking up collections. Raising a collection is a formal interval and impressive episode in every service. The deacons and stewards take their stand in front of the pulpit and while the congregation sings song after song the contributors rise, come forward, and deposit their gifts compassed about by a cloud of admiring witnesses. The church treasurer is expected to keep an accurate record of each contribution and to render a public report of totals by names at the end of the year. The ceremony is appealing, persuasive, compelling. A time or two we have ourselves passed through this experience, and it left no money of any sort in our pockets. The Negroes show positive genius in this matter.

7. The religion of the Negro is highly imaginative and emotional. How could it be otherwise? A common comment is that it is strongly mystic and feebly ethic, but when we consider how much of our own religion is contemplative and how little of it is active and actual, we are not inclined to press this comment into criticism of Negro spirituality. We know so many instances of unobtrusive but sturdy right-living among our Negroes, so many hard-working, right-minded, honest and reliable Negroes, so much of the righteousness that exalts a community, that we are increasingly grateful and less and less critical of our colored friends and neighbors.

8. And finally it is evident that we are still far from knowing the things that seethe in the soul of the Negro deep down below the surface—largely the things about which he is himself inarticulate and dumb. In the South we think we know the Negro, and superficially—very superficially—we do; but as a matter of fact the self-protective hiding instinct of jungle days lingers on as a distinct racial element of Negro character, and the real Negro is cunningly withdrawn from sight, quite instinctively and unconsciously. The

Negro knows the Southern White man far better than the Southern White man knows the Negro. He infallibly senses the worst in the best of us. He knows unerringly our weaknesses, defects, and deficiencies of disposition and character. In the days before the war young mistis never argued with Black Mammie when she said of the dashing young beau, "Honey, I done tuck de measure uh his foot. He ain gwine do. He ain no quality folks like us." Verdicts on all intimate family matters were sure to be rendered by the house servants—adroitly and inoffensively always; and they were accepted as final, not always without reluctance but always without debate.

The negro is a superb judge of character—not of the best but of the worst things in character. It is another survival of primitive traits. It renders him acutely aware of the worst in the best of us and equally blind to the best in the worst of us. Largely because of this primal instinct he leads a life of racial aloofness, from which he emerges only when he is in trouble—say, when the sheriff seizes his property for taxes or his person for offenses against the law. When in need he calls on his white friends for endorsements, gifts, loans, food, fuel, old clothes, donations for church and school buildings and the like. But in ordinary times and seasons he withdraws into himself, goes his own way, and lives his own life.

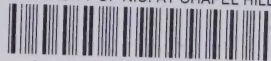
It is a state of affairs in the South that hardly challenges consciousness and rarely occasions comment. But more and more the races draw apart. Each pursues the even tenor of its way with increasing unconcern about the other. The Negro establishes an autonomous church life of his own. The white churches feel less and less responsibility for his spiritual well-being. And thus it becomes far easier for us to have an incredible tenderness for Blacks a thousand miles away than to love the wood-chopper in our back yards—as Emerson once reminded a Boston audience.

The only points of racial contact in the South lie in the world of economic dependencies, and—as we are beginning somewhat to realize—in the social nexus that makes health or disease an inescapable common estate.

We suffer from a wide-spread lack of sympathetic understanding of the Negro. Whether or not the Negro can work out his own salvation without our help is not the main matter for us to consider. Whether or not we can work out our own salvation, if we do not help this backward race to the best of our ability, is a matter of grave doubt in my own mind.

We are and ought to be in peril if we dare to leave out of our scheme of ethics or religion any creature of God's, black or white, dumb or human, who can in anywise be bettered by our help.

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